

**Picturebooks, pedagogy and philosophy**, by Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss, New York and London, Routledge, 2012, xiv + 269 pp., £80.00, ISBN 978-0-415-88080-0

This is a fascinating and insightful book which was hard to put down. As someone unable to draw, and unconfident and hesitant around the language of art interpretation, I was captivated by the illustrations, and the depth and directness of the philosophical responses they evoked in children as young as eight. As I read the book, I found myself frequently revisiting Sendak's *Wild Things*, Velthuijs's *Frog, Duck, Hare and Pig*, Wagner's *John Brown*, the *Midnight Cat* and the many other characters depicted in its pages: their immediacy, power and expressiveness leapt off the page, perhaps with added force and freshness, because they were mostly as new to me as to the children Haynes and Murriss work with.

The authors communicate their deep love for picturebooks as they introduce their work. They see picturebooks as multi-layered and complex texts in their own right rather than as second class and lower status stepping-stone, not real books at all, and to be discarded as soon as a child has progressed to proper grown-up reading. Of particular interest was the authors' reference (65) to picturebook author and illustrator Anthony Browne's insight that children classified as below-average readers of print were often excellent and perceptive readers of pictures (Anthony Browne interviewed in Arizpe and Styles 2003: Afterword).

In Chapter 3, the authors describe the context within which their own work evolved, the Philosophy for Children (P4C) programme created by Matthew Lipman, former Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University. Lipman was so struck by his students' difficulties with logical thinking and reasoning that he decided earlier intervention was urgently needed long before young people entered higher education. Lipman developed P4C to strengthen children's capacity to enquire and to make philosophy accessible to children and adults. Haynes and Murriss show in detail how their own theory and practice differs from that of PC4, notably in the use of picturebooks selected from existing children's literature rather than of specially written programme texts without illustrations.

The authors believe that exploring controversial subjects is critically important in education, and reject as well-meaning but misguided over-protectiveness attempts by teachers, librarians and others not only to censor the books children are permitted to read but also to guide children's reactions to what they read in the directions adults judge to be appropriate. Often, the authors suggest, these attitudes are protecting the adults' beliefs and sensibilities about what children are like, what books are good for them and how sheltered they should be from the complexities of experience. The resilience and perceptiveness in the children's responses would seem amply to justify this stance.

After reading a picturebook such as Velthuijs's *Frog In Love* (1989), Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) or Ungerer's *The Three Robbers* (1991) among many other possibilities, the children generate questions and vote on which one they will discuss. The authors skillfully show how the children's probing thinking touches on deep and difficult philosophical questions – time and space; the nature of perception; the relationship between body and mind; the difference between brain and spirit; the existence of life after death, and the definition of good and evil to select just a few.

The depth and fluency of some of the children's responses stayed in my mind for a long time. For example, the eight-year-old boy Gavin responding to the question the children had generated and chosen for enquiry: 'Did Max in *Where the Wild Things Are*

go on holiday?' During the discussion the idea emerged that you do not need to travel physically to go on holiday. For Gavin, Max's journey to where the wild things are was a 'spiritual journey':

I think Max had a spiritual journey because a bed canott (sic) turn into a boat in the phiscal (sic) world and you cannot control your dreams. So Max moved from one world to another. (48)

The spirit is the only part that survives death. It's the only thing that forms a person, what they look like and who they are and also tells you what you are going to do, because it is part of you. It's the thing that sets out what you're going to do, because the brain can't do that. The brain can't do that, because it only tells your body to move, but not what you are going to do. I don't believe in science to the end. (48)

Then there is the little girl who resolves to keep a closer watch on her teddy bears following a debate about whether teddy bears can move or not: perhaps they can, but they only do it when children aren't looking as they don't like being watched. It may therefore be inaccurate for her to assert that teddy bears cannot move. (151)

Although I have no experience of teaching the primary age-group whose lively, thought-provoking and moving ideas punctuate this book, I believe the questions arising about the value of disagreement and risk-taking in the classroom, how to create space for novel thinking, and how to establish genuine equality and trust in the student– teacher relationship have something to say to practitioners at all levels of education. To take one example, for any teacher, teacher educator or student who has experienced the negative side of a learning outcome dominated approach to teaching, the children's confidence, curiosity, spontaneity and openness to changing their minds as they explore difficult topics is revealing and inspiring. Their open-ended dialogues powerfully highlight the unfamiliarity of teachers accustomed to setting and controlling the classroom agenda of not intervening too early, holding back from speaking and interpreting and allowing students the time and space to find their own voices.

In my own work, I am concerned with the role of listening in the formation or inhibition of students' voices, and so the authors' examination of the notion of philosophical listening in Part III of the book was of particular interest. The distinction is drawn between listening and consultation, and the fallacy noted that consultation is not synonymous with participation. Open and active listening entails making oneself vulnerable to others, and letting in the possibility of potentially disorientating and profoundly challenging alternative ways of understanding.

As a result of reading this book, I bought Max Velthuijs's *Frog in Love* (1989) and *Frog and the Birdsong* (1991). Their presence on my bookshelf will remind me of the insight into a different part of the educational world which this book gave me, and the importance of acknowledging perplexity and uncertainty in making sense of the world, and not needing to know all the answers.

## References

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2012.729892>

**Reassessing the impact of teaching assistants: how research challenges practice and policy**, by P. Blatchford, A. Russell, and R. Webster, London, Routledge, 2011, 163 pp., £80 (hardback); £21.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780415687638

*Surprising, unexpected, counterintuitive, troubling*; these are a few of the terms Blatchford, Russell and Webster use to describe findings from their groundbreaking research based on the *Deployment and Impact of Support Staff Project* conducted in England and Wales between 2003 and 2008. If provocative terms are not enough to pique your interest in reading this book, maybe you will be persuaded by the fact that this accessibly presented volume summarises data from the largest interrelated set of studies internationally conducted to date on the use and impact of teacher assistants (TAs) in schools. This longitudinal, mixed-methods investigation included data from thousands of students with and without special educational needs and school personnel. It will encourage you to reassess what has long passed as conventional wisdom regarding the use and impact of TAs.

Many educators and policy-makers have viewed the increasing numbers of TAs to support teachers and pupils as a logical, desirable, cost-effective solution to confronting contemporary challenges faced by schools such as teacher workload concerns and inclusion of students with special educational needs. While the data suggest some positive aspects of utilising TAs, they also lead to the authors' concern that pupils in most need of educational supports are being let down by current classroom practice that relies on insufficiently prepared and inadequately supervised TAs with unclear and potentially inappropriate roles. Their findings replicate some earlier research, but more importantly have broken new ground by exploring the relationship between TA support and academic achievement, and providing plausible explanations for their unexpected findings. Their discoveries are bolstered by the naturalistic design of their research. Unlike intervention studies, where researchers test a promising practice under controlled conditions with small samples, these data represent what actually was happening in hundreds of schools under typical conditions.

The introductory chapter summarises how the utilisation of TAs intersects with key issues facing schools. Since all of the data were collected in the UK, understandably the book delves most deeply into the UK context (e.g. history of school service delivery, government initiatives), although it also draws upon professional literature from other countries. The authors make clear that this book is not intended to be a practical guide for schools, but rather a presentation of descriptive data with implications for policy and practice. Chapter 1 first introduces the reader to the *Wider Pedagogical Role* model, a conceptual framework consisting of three elements: (a) preparedness, (b) deployment and (c) practice, which are relied on later in the book.

Chapter 2 explores the impact of TAs on teachers, teaching and pupils (e.g. pupil behavior, academic attainment, teacher workloads, teacher stress levels, job satisfaction, pupil engagement, active interaction with adults). Some of the most compelling data in the book